CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2004

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Today, let candles shed their radiant greeting.
Lo, on our darkness are they not Thy light
Leading us, haply, to our longed-for meeting?
Thou canst illumine even our darkest night.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Letters and Papers from Prison

The birth of a baby in a stable in a small village in a remote corner of the Roman Empire two millennia ago received a lot of media attention in the year of our Lord 2004. The nativity was on the cover of both *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the extensive articles were quite good, I thought, respectfully explaining precious Christian beliefs and including a sampling not only of some of the classic artistic masterpieces inspired by the birth of Jesus, but also of something else wonderful the birth has inspired, namely annual children's Christmas pageants. We had our own right here in this sanctuary at 4:00 p.m. The shepherds and the sheep were here, and the angel choir sang and wiggled, including my beautiful granddaughters, and the stately magi processed in. Mary and Joseph and the baby came last, and right here in this pulpit there arose a large, beautiful, bright Christmas star shining over the slightly chaotic but beautiful tableau.

It was all quite wonderful and more expressive, as I have always thought, of the simplicity and beauty and human reality and wonder of that night than all the scholarly sermons in the world have ever been.

The media attention and the thousands upon thousands of Christmas pageants that happened today throughout the world were quite a contrast to another Christmas story that has been much in the news, what some are calling the "War against Christmas" in the name of political correctness. Fox News talk show host Bill O'Reilly even called it the "anti-Christmas Jihad." To be sure three baby Jesus' were stolen from their crèche mangers out in Woodstock and here and there across the country public schools and municipalities have tried to respect the religious diversity of our culture and to be mindful of what Anna Quindlen called the "rich-tradition of faith-based bullying in this country." "If people are worried about keeping Christ in Christmas," Quindlen wrote, "they might personally exhibit tolerance and

charity, kindness and generosity"— toward people of other faiths, their neighbors.

The *Tribune* wisely advised that whether you say "Merry Christmas" or "Happy Holidays" really doesn't matter nearly as much as the spirit of Christmas, the idea of peace on earth, that binds us all together, all people, all nations, all faiths.

We had our own version of the issue here at Fourth Presbyterian Church in our Day School. The director, Ruthie Hornaday, wanting to respect and include the non-Christian children in our school, devoted class time to Hanukkah, told the exciting story, showed the children the menorah. They were enchanted. In some ways they story of Hanukkah is more exciting than the Christmas story. In fact, one little Presbyterian boy went home and said to his mother, "Mommy, if I'm Jewish, you better tell me about it!"

More than a billion Christians will commemorate their Lord's nativity, *Newsweek* reported. Amid candlelight carols, the old story will unfold again. And the language, as always, will captivate us: "unto us a child is born."

People who have not darkened the doors of a church for a year enter into the quiet mystery of a Christmas Eve service. Sometimes the preacher even uses the occasion to scold them. Not this preacher. I loved something I read by popular author Rabbi Harold Kushner. A colleague told him about a sermon in which he pointed out the inconsistency of people who come to synagogue on special occasions and High Holy days but don't come to weekly Sabbath services. He said it was one of his most effective sermons. People listened to him and stopped coming on special occasions.

I'm glad you're here. There's nowhere in the world I would rather be this evening than here, together, in church, hearing the old story again, singing the carols, lighting our small candles.

The language never fails to captivate us:

> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. . . .
>
> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger. . . .
>
> Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:
>
> "Glory to God in the highest
> and on earth peace."

The language captivates and touches something deep in our souls whoever we are and whatever we believe. And these words, too:

> "The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."

That is how the Fourth Gospel introduces the ancient story: not with a nativity, but light, a small light shining in the darkness, a candle. And that is exactly the meaning of the precious story we love so much.

I had heard that a friend of mine, Henry Andersen, had a dramatic and harrowing experience on Christmas Eve, and I wrote him around Thanksgiving and asked if he would mind telling me the whole story. He sent me a thick envelope of materials, old newspaper reports. Hank is a Presbyterian minister, and a good one. He's retired now, in Minneapolis. He was the pastor of Fairmont Presbyterian Church, in Cleveland Heights, and First Presbyterian Church, LaGrange. He has a relationship to Fourth Church. He was a protégé of Harrison Ray Anderson, the pastor here in the '40s and '50s, and he was a student intern here during his days at McCormick Seminary. He even lived in the manse for a while, and he and his wife, Mary, courted in the formal manse living room, under the watchful eye of Mrs. Anderson.

But sixty years ago tonight, Christmas Eve 1944, Hank Andersen was an eighteen-year-old sergeant in the 262nd Regiment of the 66th Division on a troop ship sailing from Southampton, England, to Cherbourg, France, to join the Battle of the Bulge. The crossing was rough and the night bitterly cold; many of the 1,100 American troops crowded into the hold of the old wooden Belgian cattle ship were seasick. At 2:30 a.m., the lights of newly liberated Cherbourg—Christmas lights—were visible. The anchor was dropped. Hank and seven buddies who had decided to stay on deck during the crossing were huddled together singing Christmas carols. They decided to go below and serenade their miserable buddies. Before it was over, some 200 joined them, and they all went back up on deck to continue singing carols.

Just then there was a huge explosion. A German U-boat torpedoed the troop ship, which began to list and sink immediately. Almost all of those below deck were lost. The 200 men on deck were trapped. A British destroyer pulled alongside to try to help. The only escape was to leap onto the deck of the destroyer, pitching, heaving, twenty or thirty feet below. Some tried and missed. Hank jumped and made it, was knocked unconscious. When he awoke, he thought he was in heaven. Along with 200 other survivors he ended up in a Cherbourg maritime station, dazed, cold, traumatized. And then the most amazing thing happened: an African American Quartermaster unit heard about the disaster, came to the station, gave the survivors their

Christmas dinners, and gathered around them singing Christmas carols and spirituals. Hank reflected, “The same carols my buddies and I were singing on the deck a few hours earlier, now being sung by African American troops, were healing and saving us.”

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”

Hank Andersen emerged from that and 130 straight days of combat and decided that he wanted to do something about reconciliation and peace, so he changed his plans to go to law school and became a Presbyterian minister, one of the kindest and most courageous and strongest I have known.

The amazing claim of Christmas is that, in the birth of that child, God lighted a candle in the midst of the darkness of human history. And although the darkness is sometimes very deep—as it was that night sixty years ago, as it is tonight for young American men and women in Iraq, as it is for many people coping with loneliness, discouragement, personal loss and grief—although the darkness is sometimes very deep, it has not overcome, nor will it ever overcome, the light.

It makes no sense whatever to ignore or downplay the reality of darkness.

Perhaps the most powerful lines ever written are Macbeth’s:

> Out, out brief candle,
> Life’s but a walking shadow,
> A poor player that struts and frets
> His hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

Theologian Douglas John Hall writes,

> The only authentic light for our darkness is one that has been granted in that darkness. . . . God meets, loves, and redeems us precisely where we are. God is alongside you. . . . God is in the darkest place of your dark night. You do not have to look for him in the sky, beyond the stars, in infinite light, in glory unimaginable. God is alongside you . . . in the darkest place of your darkest night.” (*Lighten Our Darkness*, pp. 149, 173)

The language captivates and touches us deeply. The light shines in every darkness.

Colleague Keith Harris and some Fourth Church senior high students were visiting the Cabrini-Green Day Care Center. They had brought some gifts.

Keith was about to tell the Christmas story when one of the children, a little boy about five years old, blurted out, “My mama said there is no Santa Claus. Santa never came to my house.” Keith paused, said he was sorry that Santa had missed the little boy’s home, said there must have been a mix-up somewhere. “But we have extra toys here,” Keith told the little boy. “I’ll bet some of them are yours.”

And then he gave the child the gifts, and he told the story of a baby boy born in the poorest of places, a cow stall, and how that baby’s crib was the cow’s feedbox and how that baby’s birth shows us the love of God and how there is nowhere we can go—no place so far away, so poor, so remote—that God’s love cannot find us.

I loved the way the *Newsweek* writer concluded his article. He wrote,

> Whatever our backgrounds, whatever our creeds, many of us are in search of the kind of faith that will lead us through the darkness, toward home.

In him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it.

May that light shine in your life tonight. Make a place for it. Treasure the light of God’s love for you—tonight and tomorrow and every day of your life. Let it lead you through the darkness, toward home. Amen.